



Hearts on fire

SCHOOLS NEED TO ADDRESS THE HUMAN ASPECTS OF LIVING IN A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY BY WORKING TO CREATE AND EXTEND COMMUNITY, AND BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL, SAYS **DAVID LOADER**.

The recent bushfire disasters in Victoria have confronted us with a powerful example of the way we build social capital. Support for those devastated by the fires has come not just from governments and non-government support agencies, such as the Red Cross. Real support, not just empty rhetoric, has come from community members, old and young, urban and rural, seeing themselves as part of the wider community. The whole community has become actively involved, by giving to appeals, by participating in voluntary endeavours and in everyday acts of practical caring.

Cultivating social capital is a critical goal of schooling and it needs to be the centre of research work for those supporting schools. Unfortunately we don't yet know enough about social capital and how it can be consciously developed and extended in schools.

At its most basic level, social capital is about seeing oneself as a critical part of a larger community to which one has responsibilities and obligations. It's about contributing to, as well as drawing on, the community's resources. It's about establishing relationships and forming networks in which values are shared and trust prevails. Building social capital depends on social learning, much of which is informal.

Those who have survived the bushfires have had to learn to draw on others' assistance, even though that might not be easy. Despite the horrors of those fires, we have become a stronger and better community because of the development of social capital in communities across Australia, and our children have been through a most striking

experience of social learning that could be further developed in our schools.

Building social capital need not be at the expense of our commitment to building a knowledge society. Our future survival depends upon our ability to understand and participate in a knowledge-rich environment. As we watch the progress of the current economic downturn and see the end of so many jobs in our community, it's clear that we need to develop our collective intelligence including developing skills in inventiveness, cooperation and problem solving. We need a commitment to lifelong learning and the development of networks that will support and enrich individual, and group enterprise.

If all we do in schools, however, is teach for the knowledge society then we'll fail our community. We should not pursue knowledge at any cost or prosperity for its own sake. Success in the knowledge society is often associated with a fragmented, frenetic world in which communities are weakened and personal gain is to the fore.

We need to get beyond market fundamentalism where supposedly the best interests of a society are only served by freeing people to pursue their private interests. Surely, if there's one thing to be learned from our current economic crisis it is that unfettered 'freedom' is more self-serving than community-forming.

In our schools, however, a U-turn to a totally regulated system would be a mistake as it would stifle initiative and enterprise, and support complacency. Furthermore it would give too much power to those who would impose a soulless standardisation on what happens in schools.

Schools need to address the human aspects of living in a knowledge society by working to create and extend community. They need to build social capital with as much enthusiasm and dedication as they currently pursue an academic curriculum and enable students to achieve success in standardised tests and external exams. They need to allocate real resources to developing social capital, including the resourcing of specialist staff to research and direct appropriate programs and administer resources. Parents and community need to be an essential part of the learning process. Social skills as well as academic achievements need to be measured at the completion of school and students need to show proficiency in both before they progress to further community-supported academic and vocational study.

Our challenge is to reconcile the economic and social goals of education. Yes, let us engage with the knowledge society fully and profitably, but let us be critical of an emphasis upon individual outcomes that are at the expense of collective outcomes, public good or community responsibility. Let us teach beyond, as well as for, the knowledge society and consciously create increased social capital. **T**

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